Cathy

a story by

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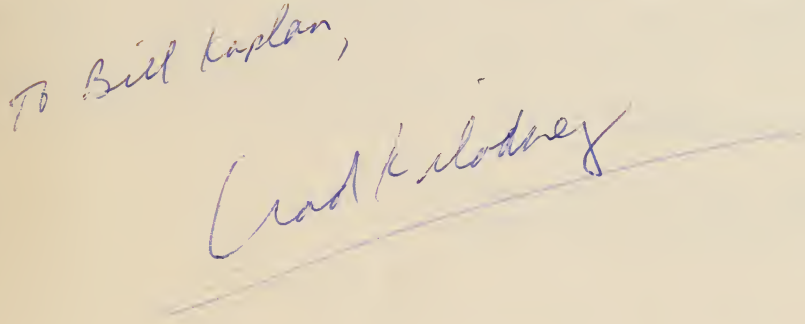

CHARNEL HOUSE

Toronto, Canada

Also by Crad Kilodney

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About The Author

Crad Kilodney is the only writer in the world who not only publishes his own books but also sells them on the street as his sole occupation. He first appeared on the streets of Toronto in 1978 with a collection of stories published as a special issue of the American literary magazine *Lowlands Review*. The following year, he founded his own imprint, Charnel House. Two other collections have been published by Virgo Press and Coach House Press.

Kilodney was born in the Borough of Queens, New York City, in 1948 and graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in astronomy. He abandoned his scientific career after a few months in favor of a literary one. His stories and other writings have appeared in more than 60 magazines and anthologies in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain, including the distinguished *Pushcart Prize* anthology. He has no formal training in literature or creative writing.

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CATHY

Cathy showed up at our front door after my mother ran a classified ad offering to rent our basement. We had never had a tenant. Nobody in the neighborhood had tenants, for that matter. It just wasn't the place for it -- a middle-class housing development on Long Island that had arisen in the 1950's to accommodate young families seeking to move away from the city. There were exactly five different models of homes in the entire development, and not one of them was designed with tenants in mind. Furthermore, in my own cynical view, the idea of taking in some innocent person under our roof seemed like a cruel joke.

I remember that my mother ran the ad on Saturday, July 3rd, and I said to her that nobody would be apartment-hunting on the Fourth of July weekend. "You'd be surprised," was all she said. When the phone rang that evening and I overheard the conversation, I was stunned that somebody actually wanted to look at the place. I sent a telepathic brain wave over the phone wire to warn the person, but it didn't work. We weren't going to be home on Sunday because we were going to my grandparents' for the whole day, but Monday was fine, my mother told the caller.

On Monday afternoon, July 5th, Cathy and her friend, Janet, who was acting as chauffeur, came to the house. The moment I saw Cathy, I thought she was the prettiest little pixie I'd ever seen in my life. She was about five feet tall, very slim, and had short red hair and blue eyes. She smelled of *Jean Naté* bath oil. She was about my age (23). She shook hands with my parents and me, and then my mother escorted her downstairs to see the alleged apartment in the basement. I confess that I had sexual thoughts about Cathy immediately, and I was so flustered that I went up to my room because I was afraid to find out whether she would take the apartment or not. I looked out the window and saw Janet's old Chevy, then sat down at my desk and wrote the name "Cathy" about a hundred times on a piece of paper as if it were a magical gesture. Purely by instinct, I spelled it with a "C," not a "K," and I was right.

After a few minutes I heard them come back upstairs, and I heard my mother say, "You can move in today if you want." And I heard Cathy say that she didn't have too much stuff and that they could move it all in one trip.

When I heard the girls get into the car, I peered through the blinds. My stomach was fluttering.

Objectively, it was an extremely clumsy arrangement for a tenant. What my mother had done was to put up a curtain of wooden slats on a rod along the ceiling, partitioning the basement into two unequal sections. (Actually, my father did the work; my mother was in charge of thinking.) The smaller section contained the oil burner and oil tank, and my mother had crammed all our junk in there as well. The larger section was the "apartment," more or less a rectangle. The bed was an old chesterfield that had been our living room sofa when we lived in the city. There was a small chest of drawers and a tall metal wardrobe that served as the only closet. There was a bridge table with two chairs, a little bedside table with a lamp, and another piece of furniture that was so ugly that it had been stowed in the basement as soon as we moved out to the suburbs so that nobody would see it. It was painted blue and had little shelves and tapered upwards. It used to be in our kitchen back in the city, and little things just accumulated on it. When we moved, my mother tried giving it away, but no one would take it.

The kitchen of our basement consisted of a hot plate on my father's old workbench and a small fridge. There was one cupboard for both food and dishes, and my mother had put a few old dishes, cups, and utensils there for the use of the tenant. The sink was the large basin next to the washing machine. My mother had to have access to it, of course, but Cathy was permitted to use it, too. The tiled floor was partly covered with an old rug, again from our place in the city. There were two small windows in Cathy's part of the basement, but one of them was hopelessly jammed.

These were the better aspects of the apartment. The worst aspects were that there was no private entrance and no bathroom. The basement was connected by a short flight of stairs to the playroom, where my father usually sat watching TV and cultivating his beer belly. You got into the playroom either through the garage, through the sliding door where the patio was, or down the stairs from the main floor of the

house. So it was impossible to come and go in privacy. My mother gave Cathy the key to the back door so she could go through our kitchen and then down to the playroom. The basement door had no lock or even a latch on the inside. It never occurred to my mother that a tenant likes to have a door with a lock so he can enjoy privacy. (I had never been permitted to put a lock on my own door.) My mother said, "She doesn't need to lock her door. We're not going to bother her."

As for the bathrooms, there was a little one off the playroom with a toilet and sink only. On the top floor there was a bathroom for my parents' bedroom and another complete bathroom near my room. There was another small bedroom beside mine -- for the brother or sister I was supposed to have but never did, for a variety of reasons not worth going into. Although there was a bed in it, my mother didn't want a tenant "upstairs with us." My father kept business files in there, and my mother kept miscellaneous items and clothing.

Had I been in the position of a tenant, I would have become neurotically preoccupied with my calls of nature and when to go up for a quick shower. But then I have a thing about privacy. Other people take things in stride more easily. And some have had their sense of privacy destroyed by such things as the Army or hospitals.

The price for all this luxury was $150 a month, although Cathy was to pay $125 for July since she was coming in on the 5th. I had said to my mother, "Nobody in his right mind would pay a hundred and fifty dollars a month to live in this basement."

Her reply was, "You'd be surprised how desperate some people are." My mother really should have been in business. One of her favorite lines was, "You can make money from this." I used to mock her by holding up whatever object was within arm's reach and saying, "You can make money from this."

It's necessary to explain that all this took place during my long spell of unemployment. I had finished college the year before and gone to work soon after graduation. I worked for six months and quit at the end of the year because I was no longer interested in a scientific career. I told my parents I had decided to be a writer, even though I wasn't sure I had any future in it. They didn't take this too well. Had I said I wished to go into organized crime, their react-

ion probably would have been more favorable.

My decision -- the first real decision of my life -- set the stage for a very tense and unpleasant year. My mother made so many remarks about my wasting their money on my college education that I was goaded into making token efforts to look for work -- always some sort of menial job better suited to a cretin. (I was never hired, of course, because I was over-qualified.) So 99% of the time I was in my room with the door closed, seriously attempting to write for a living, which I admit was naïve and idiotic. Even when I wasn't writing, I stayed up there just to keep away from my parents. As the summer came on, my mother encouraged me to at least go out in the backyard instead of asphyxiating myself with my own tobacco smoke, but I refused. There was nothing out there, I said. Besides which, I was ashamed that the neighbors would see me sitting in the backyard and wonder why I wasn't working.

I took myself very seriously in those days, even though I was terribly insecure. I made a grand total of $5.00 from my writing that year -- $2.00 for a joke and $3.00 for a filler item. My parents were not impressed. "Joel Weinstein is making twenty thousand dollars a year selling swimming pools!" my mother said. The real meaning of this declaration was that we were the only Gentile family on a Jewish block, I had been the smartest one in school, and now I was letting her down.

The tension between me and my parents was increasing again after a brief lull. My father, a man given to extremes, would say nothing at all about my unemployment for long intervals and then erupt in a tirade of abuse, always primed by too much booze. My mother's specialty was innuendo -- the artful look or gesture or comment whose meaning was unmistakable. I was subjected to this small arms fire every day.

Nobody in the neighborhood knew that my father's business was declining slowly toward bankruptcy. Financial ruin was as unspeakable in suburbia as leprosy, so my parents were hard pressed to keep up appearances. My father's business was skidding on account of his drinking and just plain mismanagement. As an unemployed son, I felt guilty, although I was giving my mother $25 a week out of my savings just to help out with expenses. Of course, my mother never considered getting a job herself. She considered it her right to

be supported. Besides, none of the Jewish housewives on the block worked, and she had no intention of being one-down.

When my mother said we needed to "bring in some cash" and that she could get $150 a month renting out the basement, I didn't take her seriously at first. I thought it was one of her attempts to reinforce my guilt. I looked at my father for some clue, but he just continued shoveling spaghetti down his throat. I had this bizarre mental image of some clean, honest, civilized person walking into the kitchen and seeing my half-drunken father at the dinner table with his shirt unbuttoned and his beer belly hanging out and eating like a pig. I said to my mother sarcastically, "Who could stand to live under *this* roof?"

"You'd be surprised," said my mother. At that precise moment my father belched.

I had mixed feelings about the whole idea. On the one hand, if my mother rented the basement, there might be less pressure on me to quit my writing and get an honest job. On the other hand, my parents had never been landlords, and I was afraid of some sort of conflict with the tenant. The thought never entered my mind that we might get stuck with someone who was unpleasant. It was my parents who were unpleasant.

Cathy and Janet came back with the car full of Cathy's belongings just as we were finishing dinner. I volunteered to help carry her things in. At one point I was with Janet outside, and I made some polite comment about how nice she was to give up part of her holiday weekend to move Cathy. To my surprise, she replied, "It's none too soon as far as I'm concerned." Then, as if to explain further, she said, "She's been staying with me for three months." After a slight pause she added, "She's a good kid, but it's been a strain on our friendship."

"Oh, I see," I said.

When I went inside, I asked Cathy how she liked the basement. She smiled and said happily, "It's just fine!" and I felt like saying, *You've got to be kidding*, but I held my peace.

When all the stuff was brought in and the girls went back to the front steps, Cathy hugged Janet fervently and said, "I'll miss you. You'll come and visit, won't you?" And Janet said she would, but I could see from her expression

as she accepted Cathy's hug that she didn't want to. This parting scene disturbed me greatly and stuck in my mind.

My father was standing in the foyer smiling like an idiot. He had buttoned his shirt and tucked it in. His behavior would change radically in the presence of a beautiful girl or woman, and the falseness of his pose, especially the stupid smile on his face, offended me so much that I went back up to my room. At that stage of my life, however, almost every little quirk of my father's offended me.

As for my mother, she also changed her behavior when the occasion called for it. She cleaned up her language and affected what she called an "upper class" accent. A half hour before, she had been arguing with my father about his business, and the two of them sounded like a couple of low-class peasants. Now she put on her politest airs and even invited Cathy into the kitchen for a snack of leftovers.

Up in my room I could barely hear their voices in the kitchen. I also heard my father laugh in that particularly studied type of laugh he has, which I have always hated. It's artificially refined -- not like his usual vulgar laugh. I put on the TV to mask their voices and then fell into a deep melancholia about Cathy and the sex problem. I wanted to imagine a beautiful love affair with this girl, but it seemed that nothing beautiful could take place in this ugly household. I was terribly shy to begin with, but the prospect of having to deal with my parents' looks and remarks every day destroyed what little courage and optimism I might have had.

At 23, I was still a "boy" to my parents. My father's favorite put-down was "Grow up." My mother never told me to grow up. If she'd had her way, I would've stopped growing just before puberty. Anything sexual was a threat to her. I had had no sex education whatever. (I won't even count my father's ridiculous attempt to explain to me how to "defend" myself against "queers" before I went away to college.) When my Adam's apple first began to show, my mother screamed hysterically that I must have a vitamin deficiency. She once searched my drawers on a pretext and found a ratty copy of *Stag*, which I'd found by the side of the road. I was sixteen at the time. "Is this the kind of son I have?" she said angrily. Later, my father came up (at her prompting) and kept repeating the question, "But what do you *need* this for? Just tell me that."

From that point on, I considered my relationship with my parents to be beyond rehabilitation. I never went to them with any problem. In fact, throughout my school years I never had any help from any adult. My mother even warned me never to go to the school psychologist because it would go on my record and might keep me from getting into a "high-class" college. So I was conditioned to bottle up all my problems, and I got into the habit of just staying in my room. I would get my revenge on my parents by embarrassing them in front of company. When friends from church asked me what I wanted to be when I got older, I would say I wanted to be a janitor. "He's kidding," my mother would say with a forced laugh. When my parents tried to get me to meet the homely daughters of their respectable church acquaintances (all of whom were on a somewhat higher level socially), I would act completely aloof towards them or deliberately talk over their heads to make them feel stupid. I never went on a date throughout high school, and almost never in college either. I refused to go to my high school senior prom partly out of spite -- because I thought my absence would embarrass my parents -- and partly because I had a mental block against dancing.

I stayed away from Cathy for the rest of that evening. I didn't want to hear what stupid things my parents might be saying to her.

My mother walked in without knocking while I was watching a ball game and said, "That girl Cathy is very nice."

"That's nice," I said.

"But don't get any ideas. She's not interested in boyfriends."

I looked at her coldly. "Thanks. I appreciate the gratuitous information."

Toward the ninth inning of a close game, Cathy came up to take her shower. I don't remember who won the game. My mind was in the shower with that angelic little body. I hoped that on her way back down she would knock on my door and just come in and talk, but of course she had no reason to and didn't.

A short time later, I heard Cathy and my mother in the kitchen. They were having coffee. My mother had sent my father to bed so "we ladies can talk." I knew what this meant. My mother was going to pump Cathy about her private life. She had a deceptive way of getting people to open up to her and

was a sewer of gossip and secrets, all of it received in confidence. I wished I could've warned Cathy to be extremely careful of what she might say because my mother, in addition to being deceptive, was highly prejudiced and judgmental.

They were in the kitchen talking for quite a while when I heard Cathy's voice become a bit shaky, and I heard the words "mental hospital." Only a few other words floated up through my closed door but enough for me to understand that Cathy had been through some rough times and was trying desperately to put her life in order. Soon after that, there was a clink of dishes and cups and a scraping of chairs, and Cathy went downstairs to spend her first night under our roof.

I didn't see Cathy at all the next day. I deliberately avoided her for several reasons, all of them entirely irrational. First, I had a feeling that she was an aberration in our lives and wasn't destined to stay with us. Second, I took my mother's "warning" to heart and avoided Cathy just to spite myself. Third, I was afraid. I didn't know how to approach her or what to say. It was easier to fantasize than to risk disappointment. I spent the whole day in my room. My mother walked in and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Fine. After all we've done to educate you," she said and went out.

The next day I took a blank notebook and said I was going to the library to do some research for an article. I borrowed my mother's car and went to a sex movie instead. I imagined that Cathy was sitting beside me and we were making out. I had an erection but couldn't do anything about it. I left feeling depressed.

I got home later than I'd intended. My mother was annoyed because she and my father had already started eating. I often avoided eating at the same time as my father because he ate like a pig, and we couldn't talk about the most trivial thing without the risk of an argument. My father spoke to me in his half-drunken voice without taking his eyes off his plate. "My friend Joe Redden would be willing to give you a job as a favor to me if you don't mind commuting to New York. We could take the same train in the morning."

"I hate New York." I wanted to say that I hated the

thought of riding on the train with him every morning. But I really did hate New York as well.

"You gonna look for something out here?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You *guess* so?" He shook his head in disgust.

Then my mother asked me what my article was about.

"What article?"

"You said you were going to the library to do research."

"Oh, *that*." I was momentarily taken by surprise. "It's about, uh, medical freaks."

"IS THIS WHAT WE PUT YOU THROUGH COLLEGE FOR?" my mother exclaimed, slamming her fork on her plate. "You have a degree in physics! You should be discovering new elements or something!"

"There are no more elements to discover, Mom. The periodic table is full."

"How do you know unless you try!"

"Why don't you be a hippie and play the flute like your friend Clark?" said my father, pouring ketchup on his vegetables.

If I'd had the guts, I would've shoved his plate in his face. I ate my dinner in silence. I could always get even another time.

At that point Cathy came in through the kitchen door with a shopping bag. My father exclaimed cheerfully, "There's our girl! How're you doing?"

"Fine, thanks," said Cathy.

"Been shopping?" asked my father.

"Uh huh."

"What'd you get?"

She opened her bag. "I got some bread, and some milk--"

"You don't have to show him what you bought!" I snapped.

"Aw, dry up, you stiff!" said my father.

"It's okay," said Cathy to me.

"No, it's not okay!" I stood up and walked away from the table.

"Jesus Christ! I can't even make conversation!" my father exclaimed. As I walked upstairs, I heard him say to Cathy, "Don't mind him. He thinks he's better than us because he went to college." And Cathy laughed. She was probably just humoring my father, but I resented it at the time and resolved to "punish" her by avoiding her completely.

Later in the evening they were all watching TV in the playroom, and my mother came up to my room and said, "Why don't you come down and be sociable?"

"Why should I?"

"You're some kid, you know that?" she said and went out, closing the door loudly.

For several days I kept up this little game, which brought me no satisfaction at all. It seemed an incredibly cruel act of Fate that such a lovely girl should be under our roof yet be so unattainable. What made her unattainable, of course, was the presence of my parents. And in my own twisted way, I tried to convince myself that Cathy wasn't my type and that I didn't really go for her that much after all, even though I was keenly aware of her movements -- especially her coming upstairs to take a shower. By avoiding her, of course, I gave her no opportunity to be friendly to me. I was just spiting myself. I know it all sounds very sick. A psychiatrist once told me it was a very common type of neurotic behavior, the term for which was "reaction-formation."

The following Monday, I had to drive to the shopping centre for something, and I passed Cathy walking along the road. She had her head down and looked very sad. She didn't notice me. I felt very guilty for not stopping to give her a lift. Here, at least, we were away from the house, yet I didn't stop. I felt torn up inside. I drove to the shopping centre, parked, and went into the drug store. Then I went to the stationery store. I was about to walk out when I saw Cathy go by. I didn't want her to see me. After she had gone past a safe distance, I went back to the car and drove home. I felt very upset and introspective for the rest of the day. My father said something stupid at dinner, and I didn't even bother to argue with him. When my parents spoke to me, I replied tersely but without any emotion. My mind was elsewhere.

The next day I stayed in my room. In the evening I could hear my mother and Cathy having another late tête-a-tête in the kitchen. Cathy was crying a little. Later, I overheard my parents in their bedroom. My mother told my father that Cathy was a "psycho case" and "disturbed" and that she had better get a job soon so she could pay her rent. Other-

wise, out she'd go. My father said, "Aw, she's a good kid. Give her a chance."

"You're too soft, that's your problem! That's why you can't manage your business!"

"Jesus Christ! Give it a rest, will ya!"

Wednesday, the 14th, was a gloomy day with the odd shower. I had to drive to the shopping centre again. On the way back, I saw Cathy walking in the direction of our house, and this time I pulled over, opened the door, and beckoned to her. At first, she wasn't sure who I was. She'd seen so little of me, I guess it wasn't surprising.

"Oh, hi, Curt!" she said, smiling.

"Give you a lift back, okay?"

After she got in, I wanted to prolong the short trip back, and I thought I'd suggest having a look at my old elementary school. Before we'd gone very far, she said, "Can I ask you a question?" She looked very serious.

"Sure."

"Do you not like me for some reason?"

"What? What do you mean?" Her simple question hit me right in the guts, and I felt ashamed.

"You seem to want to avoid me."

I tried to avoid her gaze by looking straight ahead. "It isn't that exactly. I mean..." I suddenly realized what a complete idiot I'd been. "I'm sorry if I gave that impression. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"I was just wondering." She was silent for a moment. "It's just that people confuse me sometimes. I don't know how to size them up. People sometimes treat me strangely just because...I don't know if your parents told you."

"Told me what?"

"That I was in a mental hospital for a while."

"Oh, I didn't know," I lied. "Well, that isn't the reason."

"What is it then?"

We had to stop for a light. I looked at her shyly for a second, then at my own hands on the steering wheel. "I've just been a little mixed up about things. I'm really sorry."

"Okay." There was an awkward silence. "Thanks for the lift. I didn't realize when I moved in that there was no bus service on this road."

"No, there's no buses along here. This is suburbia. You're not supposed to walk or take buses. You're supposed to drive. And if you don't have a car, you're not supposed to live here." I smiled at her to reassure her I was joking.

"I don't know what I'll do in the winter," she said. "If I get a job in the shopping centre, I'll have to walk every day. I don't mind so much in the summer, but the winter could be a drag."

The light changed and we continued on. "Did you find something yet?" I asked.

"No. There's so many stores, you'd think there'd be some jobs. I made some applications, though. The drug store told me to call back next week, although they didn't say for sure that they'd be hiring."

"Which one, Genovese?"

"No, I don't think that was it."

"Austin?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"Oh, that's a good store."

"Is it?"

I shrugged. "Sure. I guess so. Hell, I don't know." This made her smile. "Say, would you like to see where I went to grade school? It's right up here."

"Sure, I'd love to."

I pulled into the empty parking lot of the Baylis School, which was built in the early fifties. I went there for two years. It was a medium-sized school with an enormous tract of land behind it, all nice and grassy. In one small area were the swings and see-saws, and behind the school were the basketball court and softball field. The rest of it was wide-open space. I was hoping the rain would hold off so we could have a nice, long walk to the far end of the grassy field.

"I noticed this school before. It's beautiful. How many years did you go here?"

"Just the fifth and sixth grades." I wanted desperately to hold hands with her as we walked, but I didn't have the courage to.

"Can we go on the swings?" she asked excitedly, just like a child.

"Gee, I don't know. Someone might chase us away."

"I don't care," she said and ran ahead of me. This was the sort of spontaneity that scared the hell out of me in

those days. She went on one of the swings and began swinging. I sat on the next one, which was much too small for me, and sort of pushed off a little with my toes.

"Did you go on these swings when you went to school here?" she asked.

"I don't think so. No, not in the fifth grade."

"Did you play lots of sports?"

"I played, but I wasn't good at anything."

"Aww!" she said, teasing me. "I forgot. You're a writer. You probably used to read books all the time."

"Yeah."

"I'd like to read some of your writing. Would you let me?"

"Sure, as long as you don't talk about it to my parents."

"Why, don't you let them read it?"

"I used to but not any more. I'm just not comfortable about it."

I felt very self-conscious at that moment and worried that someone I knew might drive by and see the car in the lot and me on the swings with a strange girl. "We could take a walk if you want. Over there." I gestured toward the far end of the field.

"Okay!" she said cheerfully.

This girl upset all my notions about mental patients. I had never actually met anyone before who had been in a mental hospital. My father had had an uncle who had spent some years in a mental hospital and had died there, but I had never met him. My mother said we were to forget he existed because he was incurably insane. She said he had beaten his wife to death. My father said it wasn't quite that way. He often spoke affectionately about Uncle George. My mother said he was a loony, and such people were beyond help. Among Uncle George's other insane crimes were flying a World War One biplane in air shows and driving around on a motorcycle in a leather jacket and looking like an "overaged juvenile delinquent."

Cathy had been in a hospital, yet she could swing on a kid's swing and not feel self-conscious about it, whereas I couldn't. At that moment I felt she was superior to me, no matter how many books I'd read.

We walked along the damp grass. I had my eyes on the ground ahead of me, but she was looking all around and even

walking backwards. "You're so serious, you know that?"

"Yeah, I guess I am." I figured she must have sized me up as a real drip. "So tell me," I said to change the subject, "how do you like living in our house?"

"It's not bad," she said, somewhat guardedly. "It'll do for now, I guess." I suddenly felt pierced in the heart by the thought that she might move out. And then I felt I was just leading myself on getting friendly with her this way. She would eventually leave, and I'd be left feeling rotten.

"What do you think of my parents?" I asked, although it was a pointless question. She certainly wasn't going to say anything bad about them to me.

"They're okay," she said. "Your mother seems to know a lot about life."

"She fools a lot of people that way. You shouldn't trust her."

"Oh, come on." She tugged at my arm. "Do you really mean that?"

I wished our first physical contact could've been a little more romantic, but for me it was a breakthrough. "Well, she's a real poker player, if you know what I mean. You can never know what she's thinking." She let go of me.

"Well, she's been okay to me so far." She seemed a bit unhappy about what I'd said, but only for a moment. "Your father's very funny. He had me laughing the other night with all his war stories."

"Oh," I said cynically. "That impressed you, did it?"

"Well, I think it's good that he can joke about something as terrible as war."

"It wasn't terrible for him."

"How do you know? I think it must have been very dangerous to be in the Navy in World War Two."

I looked at her narrowly and replied without a trace of humor. "In the first place, the Navy had the lowest casualty rate of any of the armed forces. In the second place, my father's ship never saw the enemy during the entire duration of the war."

"Oh. Wasn't he on a destroyer?"

"He was on a P.C. -- a patrol craft. He spent almost the whole war in the Caribbean."

"Oh. What exactly did he do?"

"He was a yeoman."

"What's that?"

"A clerk."

There was another awkward silence. "I don't think you like either of your parents very much."

"I don't, but I admit it."

"I don't think you're very happy either."

I wasn't at all happy with this conversation. My face felt flushed. "I'd like to sit down now."

"Okay."

We were almost at the perimeter of the field, which was neatly mown all the way to where the trees began. There had once been extensive woods there, but now there was just a narrow strip of trees and, beyond that, the parkway. It started to rain a little bit. I had a momentary fantasy of going in among the trees with Cathy and making love. I wondered what kind of magic would be required to make it happen.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"I'm surprised. I think you're handsome."

"You do?" I was embarrassed but thrilled. "Thanks. I think you're very attractive, too. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No. I haven't been involved with anyone for a long time."

I didn't know what to say next. I looked back at the school and remembered a girl I used to have a crush on in the sixth grade. I was less afraid and self-conscious then. I could talk to her. Then came puberty, which changed everything for the worse.

"I like the rain," she said, looking straight up into it.

"Me, too, but if it gets any heavier I think we should go back to the car."

Our conversation was desultory, and I've forgotten a lot of it. She spoke about her parents, but not in much detail. She was an only child, like me. She also mentioned the hospital but didn't go into detail on that either, and I didn't want to pry. We must have said a lot of trivial things, but all the time I ached for her and didn't know how to make anything happen. I remember saying to her that she had looked unhappy walking along the road.

"I was a little worried about finding a job. I really need to find something I can stick with. I just...I just want to have a normal life. I want to feel that I belong

somewhere. I know I'm not stupid. I have abilities. Maybe I don't know exactly what I'm best at, but I know I can do something useful. It's just that people are always making me feel like I'm too different to fit in. I really try to, but things just seem to go wrong."

"You should be yourself, not what others want you to be."

"Oh, that sounds so neat. That's the number one cliché. It's almost impossible to actually live that way. And besides, what if you aren't sure who you are?"

"Well, I don't know."

"Somewhere in this world..." She looked around reflexively. "...There has to be a place for me, but I don't know where. I just want to have a place to live and something to do for work. My psychiatrist used to say that was the most important thing. Like, when I go somewhere -- just walking, for instance -- I want to have a place to go and a reason for going, like maybe somebody's waiting for me or I've been invited somewhere."

"I understand. I feel the same way."

"You do? But you have a place to live, and you have your work."

"My work? Ha! That's the reason I feel so out of place. I'm a freak because I don't want to work at some stupid job from nine to five. I'm just a goddamn misfit."

"Aww, it's not the same with you. You have a good education. You have choices."

"It's no good to me now. Besides, if I weren't a misfit, I'd be at some job instead of sitting here talking with you... I'm sorry, that came out wrong. What I was trying to say was--"

"It's okay. I understand. Really." She put her hand on mine, and I turned my palm over and held hers.

It started to rain harder, so we went back to the car. I wanted to kiss her and paused before putting the key in the ignition, but my courage failed me again.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Okay."

My mother saw us drive in together, and she gave me a suspicious look. She was very friendly to Cathy, but afterwards she asked me privately, "Where did you go with Cathy?"

"I didn't go anywhere. I gave her a ride home, that's

all." But it was obvious she didn't believe me.

That evening something happened. I'm not sure what, but it had to do with Cathy and my father. I overheard my parents arguing about it, but I didn't quite catch it, and Cathy never said a word to me. But apparently she went up to the playroom to use the toilet while my father was watching TV, and there was some sort of incident. He was undoubtedly drunk at the time because he almost always was in the evenings. My mother happened to pass by the stairs at the wrong moment. I think Cathy may have raised her voice. Then later my parents had an argument in their room. My mother said something about Cathy being more trouble than she was worth. I was so upset I didn't sleep at all that night.

The next day at dinner, Cathy passed us quickly going through the kitchen and only uttered a polite greeting. Afterwards, I knocked on her door and asked if I could come down. I questioned her about the evening before, but she said nothing happened. I asked her how the job search was going. She said she'd been to every store in the shopping centre and had found nothing.

"Did you fill out applications at least?" I asked.

"Sure. A lot of places."

"Did you fill them out honestly?" I could see it was a painful question for her.

"Yes, why not? I'm as good as the next person. I don't have to lie about myself."

"I know. I agree with you."

I looked around the basement. It was the first time I'd been down there since she'd moved in. It actually looked rather nice. She had prettied it up with a few little personal touches. The place seemed warm and human. On the wall above her bed she had taped up a reproduction of a painting that I recognized.

"I see you like Van Gogh," I said.

"You recognize it?"

"That's *Starry Night* -- the first one -- from his Arles period. Eighteen eighty-eight."

She looked at me with a mixture of delight and amazement. "You must know Van Gogh very well."

"Yeah, pretty well. He's my favorite. And this is one

of my favorite Van Goghs."

"It's my favorite, too. I've had that picture for years. Van Gogh was in an asylum, too."

"Yes, but this was before that period."

At this point our conversation was interrupted by my father, who called down from the top of the stairs, "Curt, you down there?"

"Yeah. Why?" I called back.

"Just checking."

"Checking for what?" I replied angrily.

"Don't get nasty!" he called back. Then the TV went on, and I could tell he'd left the door half-open. I went up and closed it.

A few minutes later, my mother came down to put some clothes in the washing machine, although Thursday was not her usual washing day. It was a small load. I considered this to be a deliberate intrusion. My mother said some cheery banalities, and Cathy replied in kind and didn't show any annoyance, although I think she was annoyed, too. My mother said, as if in warning, "I'll have to come down again later to put them in the dryer."

"I can do it," I said.

"Oh, are you going to be down here for a while?" She gave me the sort of look only I could recognize because I knew her ways so well.

"Maybe," I said.

My mother's expression conveyed a subtle hostility, which I could read even from a bad angle. I think I could've read the back of her head, in fact. It wasn't that she was hostile to either of us individually, just the two of us together, which threatened her sense of control.

"Now you can see why I never had the nerve to bring a girl home," I said to Cathy after my mother had gone back upstairs.

She was suddenly very serious and took my hand. "Please sit on the bed with me."

I wasn't sure whether I should take my slippers off. I finally did. I felt very self-conscious when the bed squeaked because I thought my mother could hear it.

"You can put your arm around me if you want," she said.

"Okay."

She held my hand in hers and said, "I hope I'm not being

too forward."

"No, I appreciate it. I guess I'm not the aggressive type."

"I really didn't know what to think of you when I first moved in, but now I think you're a very fine person. And you're the only one here who's really my friend." A slight nervousness crept into her voice, and she held my hand tighter. "I like you a lot, and I hope you like me."

"I do," I said. "A lot."

"So why don't you kiss me?"

I kissed her. It was a short kiss. She pulled my head down for a longer one. I don't know how long it lasted, but it was very long. It made me feel like I was floating. I could feel my heart pounding.

Then she said, "Yesterday when we were sitting on the grass behind the school, I felt very attracted to you."

"You did? I couldn't tell."

"You know what I was imagining? I imagined that we went into the woods where no one could see us and we made love."

No girl had ever said anything even remotely like that to me in my entire life. I felt a rush of adrenalin in my guts. "You won't believe it, but I imagined the same thing."

She smiled. "You should've been bolder."

"Next time," I said, kidding.

"Yes, next time," she said, and she wasn't kidding.

I think in every person's life there must be one moment of unqualified happiness that becomes fixed in the memory like a sort of landmark. For me, that was it. It was the sudden realization that I was loved.

We did a lot more kissing and talking before my mother found another pretense for interrupting us. "Kids, I have some cherry pie. Come on up," she called down to us.

"Oh, shit," I said.

"Let's go," Cathy said. "We don't want her to get too suspicious." The way she said it thrilled me. I thought, *This is a love affair! I'm having a real love affair!*

We had our dessert, but I didn't go back downstairs with Cathy. My mother remarked that perhaps I shouldn't intrude on her privacy so much! I was about to explode when Cathy said, "I don't mind, but I think I'm keeping Curt from doing his writing." She gave me a look that I understood. It meant that everything was cool.

"Yes," said my mother, "Curt's a very good writer. I've been telling everyone what a great writer he's going to be some day. He's going to write a best-seller and dedicate it to his parents. Aren't you, dear? He takes after his father, you know. His father wrote things in the Navy."

I took all this bullshit with a phony smile and total restraint. I ate my cherry pie and thought about things to come.

The next morning around noon, I was awakened by a phone call. It was my friend Clark, the only friend I had in those days. He had just gotten back from one of his many hitchhiking trips and invited me to come right over. My father always referred to Clark contemptuously as a "flute-playing hippie," but Clark had never played the flute, nor was he a hippie. I had merely mentioned to my father one time that Clark had met some people in Washington Square Park, one of whom was playing a flute, and he joined them in some singing. Clark was really a wonderful guy, a true intellectual and individualist, a fearless adventurer, totally self-confident, and not given to any of the mindless jargon of the hippie movement. His parents were both language teachers, had tenure, and made good salaries. They liked me, and I often wished I could've had parents like them. I never heard a mean word in their house, and Clark got along so well with them it seemed unnatural. I didn't think families like that existed. They didn't mind that Clark worked at temporary construction jobs, even though he had an I.Q. of 165. In between jobs, he would take off with his knapsack and see a bit of the country. They thought that was okay, too.

He had the house to himself while his parents were on vacation in Costa Rica. When I arrived, the chess set was set up on the kitchen table. That chess set and that kitchen table are etched in my mind forever. It was an oasis of sanity in my life, and Clark's friendship counted as much as a thousand friendships with "ordinary" people. We were different, but somehow the chemistry was just right between us.

Normally, I'd let him talk at length about his latest trip, but this time I sprang the news on him at once that we had a girl living in our basement and that we were in love. I knew I was being indiscreet in confiding everything, but Clark was the one person I never hid anything from. We played

our chess game and smoked our pipes, and Clark smiled or looked thoughtful in reacting to everything I said. All the while, he was killing me on the chess board, but I didn't care.

"This is true love," I said to him. "This is for real, but it seems like a dream."

He lit his pipe and looked at me shrewdly. "It *sounds* good. I hope it's as good as you think it is."

"Yeah, well, I know what you mean. Things have only just started, but believe me, if you could meet her you'd know how sincere she is." I was a bit unhappy that Clark was not acting more impressed. He blew a couple of smoke rings and watched them expand into nothing.

"It's not necessarily a question of sincerity," he said. "Things just have a way of going in unexpected directions."

I felt as if I'd been cut down a notch. "Maybe I'm jinxing myself by talking about it," I said. "Maybe I should've kept my mouth shut."

"No, it's okay. I don't believe in jinxes as such. But I do believe in Fate, or Chance, or Cosmic Forces, or whatever you want to call it. It's a very complex and deceptive thing. I'm speaking from experience now."

"You're not showing the enthusiasm I hoped you would."

"Well, I don't want to see you set yourself up for a bad fall."

"Thanks a heap."

Clark shrugged and tamped his pipe with his pipe tool. "I'm your friend, you know. I don't tell you what you *want* to hear." He relit his pipe. "But I always hope for the best for you."

I looked at the chess board. "I see I've screwed this game up royally."

"Your mind wasn't on it. We'll have another, and I'll tell you about these wacko characters I bumped into in Massachusetts."

I got home around 11:30 that night. Everyone was still up. To my surprise, Cathy was sitting at the kitchen table in her bathrobe with my parents. They all looked rather serious, but they greeted me and asked if I'd had a good visit with Clark. I said yes. I sensed that there was something odd going on, but before I could ask, Cathy said she'd gotten

a long-distance call from her mother in Portland, Oregon, informing her that her father was very sick and might not live much longer. So she had to fly to Portland as soon as possible. I knew Cathy was not at all close to her father, although she loved her mother very much. Nevertheless, she seemed very disturbed by the news.

"When are you going?" I asked.

"I don't know. I have to go to a travel agency, but I have no cash and tomorrow's Saturday."

My parents only had about a hundred dollars in cash, and I only had about thirty. However, Cathy had money in her chequing account at the local bank in the shopping centre.

"What would it cost to fly to Portland?" I asked.

"Quite a bit," said Cathy. "And you have to book in advance to get a cheap fare. I have to fly out tomorrow if I can. And even if I have enough in my account, I don't think they'd take a personal cheque."

My father said to my mother, "Why don't you call Tibor tomorrow?" Tibor was an acquaintance who ran a little travel agency in the shopping centre in a small, second-floor office. He was the brother of a famous British author.

"Yes," said my mother to Cathy. "Tibor will take a cheque. I'll call him and explain the situation."

I was unhappy that Cathy would be leaving, but I didn't say anything in front of my parents. The girl had to go, and that was all there was to it. I'd miss her, but she'd be back.

On Saturday morning, I took Cathy to Tibor's travel agency. Tibor was a man who worked with deliberate slowness, although he was by no means stupid. He just didn't like to rush. He was quite friendly with us, and as we were the only customers in the office, he wanted to chat a bit. He asked me if I'd read his brother's latest book. I confessed I hadn't. "It's hilarious," said Tibor. "You must read it."

He looked over his airline schedules and made musing sounds, rubbing his chin with his hand. Cathy and I smiled faintly at each other. She looked like she hadn't slept all night. I hadn't slept much myself. "The problem is that this is Saturday," said Tibor, "and you want to fly this very day."

"Please do the best you can," said Cathy.

"I shall do what I can," he said in his cultivated Euro-

pean accent.

Tibor made several phone calls with no luck before finally getting Cathy booked on a flight out of La Guardia at 4:00 that afternoon with stops at Chicago and San Francisco. He interrupted his conversation with the reservation clerk to say to Cathy, "The return will be easier. I can get you back via San Francisco and then non-stop to La Guardia. When do you want to return?"

"I don't know," said Cathy. "Can I just fly one-way this time?"

"Of course, but if you want a better fare on the return trip, you should pick a day now." Cathy seemed momentarily confused. "Hold on, please," he said to the clerk. Then to Cathy: "You can pick a return date now, and if you want to change it later, you can do so in Portland."

"Okay," she said. "Make it two weeks." That made it Saturday, July 31st.

Tibor made the reservation. The total cost came to about $450 and was almost as much as Cathy had in her chequing account. She made a feeble laugh about being broke now. I smiled in sympathy. At that moment I didn't realize the implications of what had just happened. My mind must have been asleep.

Tibor was very gracious about accepting her cheque. After we had left, she said to me that he was a very nice man.

"If you need some pocket money, I can lend you a few bucks," I said.

"No, it's okay. I'll be okay till I get to Portland."

I asked her if her parents had ever helped her out financially. She said they were in bad circumstances themselves. "Besides, my whole family situation is very touchy and complicated," she added.

I volunteered to drive Cathy to La Guardia Airport. She was very quiet at first but then became more talkative. I think she was trying to cheer me up so that I wouldn't make an emotional scene when I dropped her off.

"I'm going to be thinking about you every moment that you're gone," I said. "I don't know how I'll be able to think of anything else."

"Well..." she began, looking straight ahead. "Don't get all preoccupied with me. Do some writing or go visit Clark and play chess."

"Yeah, I guess I will. So I can expect you back on the thirty-first?"

"I think so. I'll send you a post card."

"No, not a post card! My parents will read it! Send a letter."

"Okay, a letter."

When I dropped her off at La Guardia, I told her I loved her and she told me she loved me, too. But she would only give me a very short kiss. And then she carried her suitcase into the terminal and disappeared from sight.

That evening I circled Saturday, July 31st, on my calendar and kept staring at it as if it were the most important day of my whole life. It represented the end of two weeks of limbo and the resumption of my *real* life. It represented the proper unfolding of a love that had not yet been consummated. It meant walks to the woods behind the school. It meant having her stop at my room after her nightly shower to kiss me goodnight, and God knows what else. What fantasies the naïve mind concocts!

To make the first few days pass quickly, I wrote a lot. I also played a lot of chess with Clark. He was still very guarded in his opinion about this love affair. "We can only hope for the best," he said.

On Thursday, the 22nd, I received a letter from Cathy. She had written it the day after her arrival in Portland. It was very short. The important part was: *"Love you and miss you a lot. Can't wait to see you again."*

This was all the proof I needed, as if I needed any. It was too sacred an object to show to Clark, but I told him what was in it. He nodded slowly and said, "It's a good sign. Anyway, we can only hope for the best." I chided him on his cautiousness and then beat him on the chess board. I was on a drugless high.

As the 31st approached, I worked myself into a higher and higher emotional state. Had the Devil appeared and asked me to stake my life and happiness on Cathy's return, I would have done so. Every night when I went to bed, I took out her letter and read it again. Then I would have elaborate erotic fantasies about her. I thanked God for bringing Cathy into my life. I marveled at the miraculousness of Fate in creating such happiness for me through an ad placed by my mother,

of all people. I'd always regarded my mother as the principal author of my unhappiness.

My behavior toward my parents was exemplary. I didn't get into a single argument. I even had to curb my excitement so as not to arouse their suspicions. Whenever my mother asked me shrewd questions calculated to probe, I was always very careful in my answers.

When I was alone in the house, I'd go down to the basement and look at all of Cathy's things. I went through her underwear drawer shamelessly and handled all her undergarments. I examined her cosmetics and her personal feminine items. I lay on her bed and even kissed her pillow. I had become a true monomaniac, with Cathy as the sole content of my consciousness.

Friday, the 30th, I didn't sleep at all. I wondered whether I should surprise Cathy by driving to La Guardia to meet her plane. But I knew this wouldn't sit well with my mother, so I resisted the temptation. I knew the number and time of her flight and mentally calculated when she would likely call from the airport the next day.

I was physically sick on Saturday. I had a bad headache and was too queasy to eat anything. I tried to take a nap in the afternoon, but my mother went on a house-cleaning binge that left my nerves frazzled.

When the calculated time passed, I became frantic with worry. I thought that something might have happened to the plane. At dinner time my father suddenly said, "Will you quit mooning about, for Chrissake."

"Who says I'm mooning about?" I replied, not very convincingly.

"Whaddya think, we were born yesterday?" he said, nodding toward my mother.

I excused myself and went upstairs.

That evening my mother came up to my room and said, "I know you like the girl, but it's no reason to get yourself sick just because she's staying longer."

"Okay, forget it! Leave me alone!" I snapped.

Sunday, August 1st: no word.

On Monday, August 2nd, my mother remarked casually, "She owes us a hundred and fifty dollars as of yesterday."

This struck me as an incredibly nasty thing to say.

"Maybe she's going to send it," said my father, uncon-

cerned.

It suddenly hit me that Cathy had exhausted her chequing account, she had no job, and my mother was not the sort of person to extend credit. I was very frightened. But then I thought that I could certainly lend Cathy the rent money out of my own savings, and my mother wouldn't have to know. Simple solution to a simple problem, I reassured myself.

On Tuesday night, August 3rd, Cathy called from Portland. My mother answered the phone, and when I realized who it was, I expected Cathy to ask to speak to me. But my mother spoke to her briefly and then hung up. She said Cathy apologized for overstaying her visit and would be arriving at La Guardia Friday, the 6th. I was elated.

The next day I went to the bank and withdrew some money in anticipation of loaning it to Cathy.

My mother made a couple of remarks about Cathy not having a job yet and owing us a month's rent. At dinner I said, "I'm sure her parents will reimburse her for the ticket."

"She's a cute girl. I like her," my father said, mixing up his Chinese food in a disgusting heap.

"Yes, and she's almost normal. You'd never know she was once in a mental hospital," said my mother, tearing open her egg roll with a serrated steak knife.

I said nothing.

On Friday I said I'd go to La Guardia to meet Cathy's plane, but my mother said, "She's going to take the train."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes. I gave her directions."

"How's she going to take the train?"

"She'll take the bus from La Guardia to Roosevelt Avenue and take the Long Island Rail Road."

"That's a hell of an inconvenience."

"No, it's not. Besides, what are you, her private chauffeur?" my mother said with some heat.

So I patiently waited in my room and tried to watch TV. But I had a nagging anxiety that something just wasn't right. I thought my mother was going to be a serious problem to us. And I was bothered that Cathy hadn't asked to speak to me. But then I took out her letter again and felt reassured. I regarded it as a sort of ironclad guarantee.

That whole day dragged with unbelievable slowness. It was impossible for me to think about anything else. Nearly

three weeks of waiting had turned me into a nervous wreck. At times I literally shook with tension. But part of me was detached from myself and looked at this pathetic 23-year-old idiot with a certain contempt. I hated what I was going through. It wasn't adult-like.

Cathy arrived in a taxi around 11:30 p.m. My mother had the back door open for her. My father had already gone to bed. I was in my robe and came down to the kitchen. When I saw Cathy, my heart wanted to burst out of my chest, but I held my feelings in check. We exchanged greetings. She seemed restrained. I was desperate to be alone with her so we could talk.

"You could've called from the station," my mother said. "We would've picked you up."

"I didn't know if you'd be up."

"What's the situation with your father?" I asked.

"He's still pretty sick. His heart is very bad."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Try not to worry," said my mother.

"Thanks," said Cathy. She looked tired.

My mother asked her if she wanted some coffee and a snack. Cathy said she just wanted to have her shower and get some sleep. "I haven't slept well lately," she said.

I went upstairs and left my door half-open so I could see her come up. When she came up with her robe and towel, I said, "Can you come in and talk?"

"Let me take my shower first."

So I waited for her to take her shower. When she came to my room, she said, "I really can't stay up and talk. I've had a long day."

"Just come in for one minute, okay?" And I gently pulled her inside, closed the door, and immediately kissed her. But she didn't seem to feel very romantic. "If you only knew how much I missed you. I've been a goddamn crazy person thinking about you all the time."

"You shouldn't have, but I understand."

"Didn't you miss me?"

"Of course, I did. Look, I'm very tired. We'll talk tomorrow."

I imposed a good-night kiss on her, and she received it with more politeness than passion. When she went downstairs, I was left feeling a bit confused. But I chose to take it at

face value that she was just tired.

I slept some that night but not a lot.

The next morning, my parents and I were having breakfast. Cathy came up quietly and tapped on the wall to get our attention. "Hi!" she said cheerfully.

"Hi, Cathy. What's cooking?" my father asked.

"Not much. Mrs. Turner, can I speak to you after you're finished?"

"Sure."

This struck me as odd. Then I figured it out: Cathy was going to pay her rent. Or perhaps she was going to explain that she'd be late with it. If so, I wanted to get down there first and offer her the loan of $150.

My mother finished and told me to wash the dishes.

"Can I go down and speak to her first?"

"You can speak to her later. My goodness." I was outmaneuvered.

They had a fairly long talk. I knew it must have something to do with the money. I did the dishes and went down to the playroom and pretended to watch TV. My father, in one of his sober good moods, asked me how the Mets were doing.

"Who cares?" I said.

"Christ, I can't even make conversation with you!"

He shook his head in disgust and went into the garage to do some little chore.

When my mother came up, she said nothing to me, but at least she didn't seem annoyed or anything like that. She went up to the kitchen, and I immediately went downstairs.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Sure." She seemed in good spirits, so I figured everything was indeed okay.

I went over to her and gave her a hug and just held her, saying nothing for a while. Every hair on her head was a miracle to me. I was holding a miracle. I finally said to her, "I loved your letter. It meant a lot to me."

Her smile conveyed some embarrassment. "I was thinking of you a lot. Did you get any writing done?"

"Some...Oh, Christ, I really love you." And I hugged her again.

All she said was, "I know you do."

"Tell me you do, too," I demanded.

"I do," she said calmly.

"Listen, if there's any problem with the rent, I'll lend it to you. Nobody'll know. I have plenty of money in the bank."

"No, it's okay. It's all taken care of."

"It is? Good." I felt relieved. She was going to stay. "Is your father going to get better?"

"It's hard to say. He's in pretty bad shape."

"How's your mother?"

"She's holding up but just barely. They have problems."

"I'm sorry. How long was it since you saw them?"

"Almost three years."

"That's a long time."

She nodded. "I feel very bad about it. Partly it was my fault, and partly it was circumstance." By "circumstance" I understood her to mean the hospital. "My visit gave me a lot to think about, so you have to forgive me if I seem a bit distracted."

"Of course, I understand. Listen, do you feel like doing something today?"

"Sure. What?"

"Want to go to the Vanderbilt Museum?"

"Okay. What do they have there?"

"There's a big estate with lots of land, and a building with marine exhibits, and a planetarium. It's my favorite place on Long Island."

"Okay, that sounds nice."

I told my mother I was borrowing her car for the afternoon, and, somewhat to my surprise, she didn't object. A little while later we were on our way to Centerport, where the Vanderbilt Museum was located.

"Many years ago, the Vanderbilts built a private road called the Vanderbilt Highway or Parkway, and it stretched from Centerport to the outskirts of New York City."

"Is it still there?"

"No, just short pieces of it in odd places. I guess joggers probably use it. But in the old days, the Vanderbilts would ride in a horse-drawn carriage along this highway under a canopy of tall trees. Just imagine it. It must have been beautiful."

"Yes, if you were a Vanderbilt."

"Yeah, I know, but the whole idea of it...God, it just does something to me. It's like a simpler time, when things

were more peaceful and beautiful."

"It's a common illusion that things were better in the old days, but I understand how you feel. I feel the same way sometimes."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I think this is my first legitimate date," I said to her.

"That's awful," she said, laughing.

"No, it's great."

We spent about three hours at the museum, taking the guided tour of the house, strolling around the grounds, and looking at the marine museum. We sat on the grass and looked out onto the water, where we could see a few sailboats on North Port Bay.

"I wish we had this place all to ourselves," I said.

"Mmm, wouldn't that be nice."

"Plenty of woods," I said, nudging her. She just smiled and looked out toward the water. For a minute or so we didn't speak. All the time I kept caressing her back gently.

"It's so peaceful here," she said. "If only you could capture the best moment in your life and hold it forever. It's a shame it doesn't last."

"Well..." I replied, not sure what she meant by that. "We can come out here as often as you like." She smiled but said nothing. "Do you want to see the planetarium show?"

"I'm sure it's very nice, but those things make me dizzy when they make the sky go around. But if you want to see it, I'll wait for you here."

"Hell, no! I don't want to go anywhere without you."

So we sat there for a long time. I thought that this was indeed the perfect moment of my life, and I thanked God for bringing such a girl into it and giving us this nice summer day and a place to spend it. Every tree and flower, every cloud, every voice, every white sail on the bay -- I took it all as confirmation of my great fortune. I thought that the world had worked very hard to arrange it all for us and wait for us to get here. I felt that all my previous loneliness was over for good. Now I, too, had someone.

My sexual thoughts were in the background, but they were there nonetheless. I traced the line of Cathy's bra across her back, but she didn't react at all. Finally I said, just

to be humorous, "I'm having naughty thoughts."

"I know," she said.

It was nearly five, and we were hungry. We walked hand in hand back to the car. It was very hot. We headed back the way we came, stopped at a fast-food place, and had a hamburger.

"You seem kind of serious today," I said on the way home.

"It's nothing," she said, patting my hand. I took her at face value again. I believed only what I wanted to believe.

When we got home, my parents were eating. We said we'd already eaten. "That's fine," said my mother.

Cathy asked me if I'd mind leaving her to herself for a few hours.

"What for?" I asked.

"I want to take a nap."

"Oh," I said, surprised.

"I'll come up and see you later when I take my shower."

"Okay," I said, anticipating a long session of necking.

My parents were strangely quiet that evening. My mother didn't ask me a single question. I actually sat with them in the playroom to be sociable for a change. We watched TV. My father asked, "How was the museum?"

"It was great."

"Did you go to the planetarium?"

"No. She didn't want to. It makes her dizzy. We saw everything else, though."

After a pause, my father said, "Sagamore Hill is nice, too. That's Teddy Roosevelt's estate."

"Yeah, that would be a good place to go," I agreed.

Around 10:00, I went upstairs so as to be in my room when Cathy came up for her shower. She came up just before 11:00. "I'm going to take my shower first," she said to me.

"Okay," I said. I burned a stick of incense to mask the pipe tobacco smell, and I ate half a roll of *Clorets*. I got very aroused thinking about her in the shower. I hadn't seen her naked body yet, but I thought tonight I might.

She came into my room, opening and closing the door very softly. She was holding her towel and her bottle of *Jean Naté*. Her hair was wet. She smelled wonderful. I gave her a deep kiss, and this time she responded with equal feeling. When we separated, she looked very serious and bit her lip.

She ran her hand slowly along the collar of my pajama top and then down my arm to my hand. There was pain in her eyes. "You're a very sweet person, and I truly care for you."

"I care for you, too."

"We should've met a long time ago, or perhaps we met too soon."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry," she said, looking down at our hands clasped together. "I'm moving out."

That moment of pain will burn in my soul forever. How three little words changed everything! It was so sudden and unexpected. It cut so deep. All I could say in a breaking voice was, "Why?"

"It has nothing to do with you, Curt. It's because of my family. Things are very complicated for them. I can't explain it all to you--" I had already collapsed in her lap, my wet eyes against her robe, which I clutched desperately. I kept saying, *"No, no, no..."*

"...I had a lot of hard thinking to do while I was away." Her voice was calm -- sympathetic but steady. "I realized that I had to move back to Portland for a lot of reasons. It's not entirely in my control, but I know it's the right decision."

I knew I was humiliating myself by crying, but at that moment I had no pride and no strength. I looked up at her and asked, "*When? When* are you moving out?"

"Tomorrow. Everything's been arranged. Janet is coming to fetch me, and I'm going to stay with her just until I pack my things and send them on ahead."

"If it's the money, *I'll* pay your rent till you get a job!" I pleaded with her.

"No, Curt. The money is only a small part of it. It's a lot of other things, too. Things haven't worked out for me in New York, and I'm needed in Portland. I *have* to go. Don't you understand?"

"No! I don't understand at all!" I stood up and turned away. "I don't understand why my happiness has to be taken away from me!" I had my head in my hands and was crying.

"You think I don't know what you're going through, but you're wrong. I've cried the way you're crying many times in my life, Curt. It doesn't do any good," she said. "It only makes it worse."

I sat beside her and forced myself to be calm, to be a man. "Please reconsider," I asked gently. "Give yourself some time. I'm willing to help you any way I can."

"I already have my ticket back to Portland. I've already decided." She held my hands and caressed them. "I considered not even coming back. I was going to have Janet pick up my things and ship them to me, but I didn't want it to be like that between us." I looked into her eyes, which now seemed so much older and wiser. I felt like a child and a weakling. "I knew it would be like this," she said. "I knew you would cry."

Her hands on mine were so real -- the realest hands that I'd ever looked at, ever touched. They were more real than my own. "When I got your letter, I was so happy. I *believed* it," I said softly.

"I know you did, and so did I. But that was when I'd just arrived. A lot of things happened after that." She put her arms around me. "I'll always love you."

It seemed like no consolation at all for what I was going through, for what I had already gone through while she was away. "Will you never come back?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"My parents know, don't they?"

"Yes. I told your mother this morning, and I asked her not to say anything. I wanted to face you with it myself." And then she stood up and picked up her towel and her bath oil. "I'm very sorry. That's all I can say."

I stood up; feeling wet and foolish and less than a human being. I just shook my head in disbelief, looking at the floor. I remember looking at the pattern in the carpet and wondering if there was some magic phrase that would prevent her from going away. Such a stupid thought! I felt utterly ineffectual. Cathy opened the door and closed it behind her as softly as when she came in.

After a moment, I went to the window and looked out upon the street. It was so calm. Only the slightest breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. I could hear the air conditioner next door. I thought then that I could not live with such pain through the night. If I could have simply lain down and willed myself to die, I would have done so without the least hesitation.

The thoughts that passed through my mind that night I prefer not to record. Such sorrow and chaos are beyond words. It was a very long time before I fell asleep, if I slept at all. I wanted desperately to dream of Cathy and me together as lovers, far off in some protected place where nothing could touch us. I prayed to God to change it all overnight, to switch the dream and the reality, to make this pain the dream and allow me to wake up in the fullness of Cathy's love.

My parents didn't wake me up. I woke up around noon when I heard a car door slam. It was Janet getting out of her car. I could hear the screen door in front make its springy noise, and then Cathy carried a box out to the car.

My mother knocked on my door and came in. "You should say goodbye to the girl," she said, with a look of maternal instruction. "It's only right." Then she went out and closed the door behind her.

I got up and put on my jeans and slippers and combed my hair. I looked like hell. But I knew that I would be calm. I was too drained for any further show of emotion.

I came downstairs as Cathy and Janet came up with more of her belongings. "Hi," I said.

"Hi," they both answered without stopping.

I went out and stood by the car with my hands in my pockets. They ignored me and stowed the boxes and suitcases systematically in the trunk and back seat. It was another warm day. Sunday, August 8th. The street was so very calm and normal, and the sky was fine. For no reason in particular, it occurred to me that Cathy had never read any of my writing. It was a stupid thing to think of at that moment, and I decided it was for the best that she had never read my work. I didn't care about it any more anyway.

Cathy and Janet made one more trip, and then Cathy went inside to say goodbye to my parents. Janet stood halfway between me and the front door. I don't think she knew quite what to say to me, and I don't know how much she knew about Cathy and me.

Cathy came back toward me, looking very lovely. I think she forced herself to smile for my sake. She shook my hand and kissed me on the cheek and said goodbye. I stood there like a dummy and just said goodbye. Janet shook hands with

me, too, and gave me a sympathetic look. She said, "Good luck, Curt," and I said, "Thank you."

They pulled out of the driveway, and I walked toward the door, pausing only to see the car disappear around the corner. I composed myself as best I could, went inside, and said I wanted to go back to bed.

"Do you want breakfast?" my mother asked.

"No, I want something to help me get drowsy."

"You do?" And for the first time, she sounded sympathetic. She knew I never drank.

My father looked up briefly from his Sunday paper. "Have a brandy. We've got brandy up there," he said, nodding toward the liquor cabinet.

I looked at the bottles for a second or two and took down the cherry brandy. I poured myself two good shots and drank them down quickly like medicine. Nobody said a word.

By the time I got into bed, the brandy was already going to work on my empty stomach.

I got up for dinner and ate quietly with my parents. They kept up a polite chatter of irrelevant banalities. I don't think I said two words. Then I went back up to my room and stayed there for the rest of the evening. They didn't intrude to say good night. They went to bed around 11:30.

I listened to some classical music on the radio and lay in bed in darkness for a long time. When the station went off the air, I turned the dial until I picked up an extremely weak signal. It was a religious station from somewhere in Virginia. I left it on because of the way it kept fading in and out, which sort of hypnotized me. I didn't actually listen to the words of the sermon, just the absurd, tinny voice against the background of static. My eyes were closed, but I don't think I actually fell asleep. I was more like in a trance of morbid introspection.

When I next looked at the clock, it was 3:00 a.m. I turned off the radio. The house was completely quiet. I could hear the air conditioner next door again. I looked out the window and tried to see the stars, but with the street lights and the limited view, it was hard to see them.

I put on my slippers and walked as softly as I could downstairs to the basement. I put on the light and looked around. It was the way it had been before Cathy came, except

that the table and chairs were unfolded, and a clean, dry cup was on the drainboard.

But Cathy had left something behind. It was the print of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, which was still taped to the wall above the bed. The sky is a dark greenish blue, the water a royal blue. The town is a rough outline of blue and violet. Its patchy lights are yellow along the shore, and their reflections in the water begin with gold and transform to greenish bronze. The stars above are spiny patches of green and pink. They form the constellation of the Great Bear. In the foreground, on the near bank of the river, are the figures of a man and a woman -- lovers -- drawn in dark blue-black strokes that blend together. They are alone on a starry night in a setting of ideal tranquility, sharing a moment of sublime and inexpressible happiness.

CATHY is Crad Kilodney's most serious book since TERMINAL WARD. It is the story of a young man's love for an ex-mental patient. Both Curt and Cathy are essentially loners who feel out of place in the world. Curt's struggle is for love and manhood; Cathy's struggle is for strength and purpose. Their story is an emotional one, told with realism and simplicity.

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